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April 12, 2001

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### **OLD 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS' ADAGE NOT GOOD ENOUGH ANYMORE**

**By Terry Brenner**  
**University Relations**

School bullies have been around probably as long as schools have. Most bullies are boys, and most of the time their bullying ways have been passed off as "Oh, well, boys will be boys."

This laissez-faire attitude was commonplace until fairly recently, says Rick van den Pol, curriculum and instruction professor at The University of Montana.

"When I taught classroom management 20 years ago," he says, "I taught teachers that you ignore this stuff and let kids solve their problems." Although this philosophy is still gospel to many parents, he says, educators are changing their tune.

"Now we think that kids don't spontaneously learn conflict resolution," van den Pol says. "They just naturally become more aggressive, more violent" because that behavior gets them what they want.

This new thinking has fostered increased awareness of various behaviors that appear early in a child's development such as discourtesy, teasing, putdowns, threats and disrespectful

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speech to adults and peers. These behaviors have potentially far-reaching consequences, and van den Pol, who directs UM's Co-Teach program, says he now encourages teachers to let their students know such behaviors won't be tolerated.

"The long-term impact suggests that bullies at age 8 -- third or fourth grade -- are six times more likely to be convicted of any crime by age 24 and five times more likely to have a serious criminal record by age 30 than nonbullies," he says. Studies show that 60 percent of children identified as bullies in middle school go on to have arrest records. And bullying is included with chronic lying, cruelty to animals and fire setting as a behavior that predicts bad outcomes for a child.

Educators now believe it's imperative to nip bullying in the bud before it blossoms into something worse. The CARE Initiative of Montana, headquartered in Billings, has put bullying on a theoretical stepladder of more than a dozen increasingly troubling and risky behaviors. When bullying is tolerated, it can progress to sexual harassment, drinking, vandalism, hate crimes, rape, murder and, at the top of the ladder, suicide.

Bullying also forebodes other risks. People who demonstrate their strength through aggression, as bullies do, have shorter life spans, less satisfactory marriages, higher incarceration rates, lower incomes, higher rates of substance abuse and more frequent hospitalizations, van den Pol says. Obviously, anyone on a bully's hit list will suffer, too.

But more subtle forms of bullying, such as socially excluding or spreading rumors about a child -- the kind of bullying girls are prone to -- can have lifelong effects on victims, as well, he says, unless adults intervene and try to help the bully and the victim find alternative ways of interacting.



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Bullying can't be squelched overnight or by hit-and-miss tactics. It takes a systemwide, communitywide approach, says UM psychology Professor George Camp, who specializes in school psychology.

"Teachers, administrators, counselors, pupils and parents need to be involved," he says. With a systemwide approach, "Kids learn to avoid conflict situations that pit a child against a bully, everybody knows what bullying is and how it's going to be handled, and children know they can tell a teacher or someone else in authority."

Countries worldwide from Sweden to New Zealand and Japan are developing such plans. Here is a composite of information gleaned from various sources, including the Olweus program, which the Missoula County Public Schools has adopted. Olweus takes a communitywide approach and recognizes the need to deal with bullies when they're very young.

- Warning signs of being bullied -- Comes home from school with torn or dirty clothing, damaged books, cuts, bruises or scratches; has few friends to play with and seems afraid to go to school; complains of headaches or stomach pains, doesn't sleep well and has bad dreams; loses interest in school work; seems sad, depressed or moody or has poor self-esteem. BBC Online includes another warning sign, aimed at older students: binges on food, cigarettes or alcohol.

- Warning signs of bullying others -- Teases, threatens or kicks other children; is hot-tempered and impulsive and has a hard time following rules; shows aggressive behavior toward adults; shows no sympathy toward children who are bullied; or has been involved in other antisocial activities such as vandalism or stealing.



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Bullies cause problems, and “kids don’t like other kids who cause problems,” van den Pol says. So bullies often suffer rejection from their peers. Peer rejection often leads to academic failure and further isolation. When isolated students form relationships with one another and become a group, they’re just a short step from becoming a gang.

Where does bullying come from? Camp says ancient cultural patterns that put men in the aggressive “hunter” role are partly to blame because such patterns are hard to interrupt. But he and van den Pol also implicate the home environment. Bullies at school oftentimes are victims at home.

“The probation folks tell us that if we have a bully in school and we end up charging that child, the likelihood is quite high that when Dad comes in, we’ll see evidence of bullying behavior,” van den Pol says.

Television watching is another culprit, he and Camp say, because of the high incidence of TV violence and the fact that the hero often initiates the violence but rarely suffers a negative consequence. So parents should monitor the television, Camp says. Reading to children, instead, gives them a caring, nurturing interaction. Twenty-five years ago in something like 75 percent or more of families, parents either read or told stories to their children. Now that number is down around 20 percent, van den Pol says.

Parents also should avoid aggressive behavior in the home, foster equality and task sharing among all family members, teach children how to cope with conflict, demonstrate empathy, and teach, praise and reinforce appropriate behavior instead of dishing out harsh punishment.

For children on the receiving end of bully tactics, van den Pol and Camp offer a few



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strategies: Try defusing an insult with a comment or joke. Change the subject. Ignore or walk away from the bully to show he hasn't upset you. Train yourself to stare someone down -- it gives the impression of confidence. Check your body language to make sure it doesn't betray fear. On the playground, move closer to an adult or to a peer counselor, if there is one. Tell someone in authority.

That last strategy is tough for children because if they tell, they face being called a tattletale. But van den Pol waves that aside. He says educators have tried to help children understand the difference between being a tattletale and preventing someone, including the child himself, from getting hurt.

"The code of silence becomes a conspiracy of silence if you allow someone to be hurt," he says.

Van den Pol sees bullying as more remediable now than ever before because society better understands that adult tolerance of bullying will worsen the problem.

"We are, as a nation, struggling with the aftermath of a number of multivictim homicides that have occurred in schools," he says. "We've had some heartbreaking scenarios where the victims -- not knowing what to do and sort of embracing the concept of 'punch back' [but] knowing they couldn't punch back -- have instead brought a gun to school."

Still, schools are among the safest places a child can be, he says. Studies show that risk of violence and aggression against students at school is one-third the risk they face in the larger community.

"But we know we can do better," he says. That's why you see all these international efforts to educate people about a problem that's been tolerated too long, he says.



That's not to say, however, that the controversial "zero tolerance" policy many school districts have adopted is the solution. It's too simplistic, van den Pol says, and overlooks the importance of progressive discipline. For instance, if two boys were fighting on the playground and the school had zero tolerance for fighting, both boys would get the same punishment. It could be, though, that one boy is in his first fight, the other in his 10th.

"When you blend progressive discipline with zero tolerance, you find that the boy who is in his 10th fight suffers a more severe kind of consequence," van den Pol says. "Most of us would embrace that kind of approach."

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